



THE CHESTER HOUSE ESTATE

STRATEGIC BUSINESS PLAN

Jack Pishhorn – Chester House Estate Business Manager

Jack.Pishhorn@Northnorthants.gov.uk



Executive Summary

The Chester House Estate is a nationally significant heritage site, being one of the few places in the country which can demonstrate over 10,000 years of human activity.

The unique selling point of Chester House Estate is summed up in the words:

10,000 years of Northamptonshire's heritage brought to life.

North Northamptonshire Council, West Northamptonshire Council and The National Lottery Heritage Fund has its vision to:

- **Connecting** the people of Northamptonshire to their 10,000 year story.
- Have the **community** at the heart of all we do.
- Delivering a pioneering and diverse education programme, **accessible** for all ages.
- Offering a free to enter estate, for **everyone**.
- Being financially **sustainable** with an innovative commercial offering.
- Establishing, promoting and growing **local** businesses, produce and tourism.
- Caring for and **preserving** our natural and historical landscape.
- Improving the **wellbeing** of local residents.
- Preserving the publicly accessible **archaeological** archives.

The operation of the site will be supported by an innovative approach to income generation. The aim is to develop the whole as a multi-use site making maximum use of spaces for different purposes and audiences and thereby generating optimum levels of income. The offer comprises:

- Free to enter visitor destination for heritage, green space, events and archaeology.
- Archaeological Resource Centre for the whole of Northamptonshire.
- Interpretation centre.
- Year- round events programme for heritage, arts, culture and leisure.
- Education and learning programme working with local partners
- Volunteer and community engagement.
- Artisan shopping – supporting northamptonshire produce.
- Bed and breakfast accommodation.
- Catering for farmhouse café and events.
- Outdoor childrens play.
- Wedding venue hire.
- Conferencing and events venue hire.

Northamptonshire County Council purchased the site in 2004 and secured grant funding through working with the National Lottery Heritage Fund (formerly the Heritage Lottery Fund) to develop a sustainable visitor destination with access for the public to learn about the history and heritage, as well as becoming the location to house countywide archaeological finds. The enabling project, once completed in 2021, will enable both unitary councils to manage an asset that is no longer a financial liability.

This document is a refreshed business plan for the site, undertaken during a period following the collapse into Administration of the contractor responsible for carrying out the original scheme and a delay in the re-tender of the capital works due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The summary position from the new Business Plan is as follows:

	YEAR 1 - 21/22	YEAR 2 - 22/23	YEAR 3 - 23/24	YEAR 4 - 24/25	YEAR 5 - 25/26	YEAR 6 - 26/27
Council Contributions (North and West)	298244.00	298244.00	283331.00	269165.00	255706.00	0.00
Footfall Projection	66600.00	133200.00	140000.00	160000.00	190000.00	225000.00
Business Plan Income	336486.00	627087.00	640012.00	731947.00	864750.00	1019550.00
Business Plan Expenditure	749330.00	744974.00	780426.00	852366.00	902649.00	983950.00
Profit/Loss	-114600.00	180357.00	142917.00	148746.00	217807.00	35600.00

The business plan, as described in more detail on the following pages, shows how this sustainable business will be achieved by the completion of the 6 year business plan.

- **Introduction: Chester House Estate**

Chester House Estate, the site and its buildings, comprises a nationally and locally significant heritage asset and Scheduled Monument across 34 hectares, lying in the Nene Valley and adjacent to the town of Wellingborough. The farm buildings and garden walls are Grade II and Grade II* Listed and the site is located within a Nature Improvement Area and adjacent to a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

The site is owned by North Northamptonshire Council and West Northamptonshire Council which has a responsibility to look after the heritage and to make the site accessible as a resource that is open to everyone.

The uniqueness of the site is in the survival of evidence of human activity in this area over a period of some 10,000 years and the survival of buried archaeological and physical remains of settlement for over 2,000 years. Of particular research interest are the buried remains of a complete Roman small walled town, one of only three such towns surviving in Northamptonshire and the only one for which extensive remains survive.

The opportunity to preserve and provide access to this historical layering formed the core of the project funded by the Council and NLHF Fund. The opportunities this range of evidence provide for education, engagement and participation underpin the public access elements of the Chester House Estate business plan as it goes forward into the future.

However, there has to be the means to maintain the heritage, requiring support for the operational costs of running the site. In addition, the Council wishes to encourage people to use the site in ways that both provide income and ensure that the money already invested offers a good return to the taxpayers of Northamptonshire and indeed the wider Lottery-playing public. The asset needs to play its role in meeting core objectives including community wellbeing and sense of place.

- **Future Governance**

Governance of the Chester House Estate project and its operation as a business will be overseen within the standard County Council governance and monitoring structures. Key decisions or changes in direction will need to be made by Cabinet. Overarching governance will be provided by the Council's Place Shaping Board. This comprises the Chief Executive and all senior Directors, key Finance, Legal and project support staff. This meets every other week and will expect to receive progress reports against key performance indicators monthly.

A Project Group will oversee the completion of the construction and then the delivery of the operational phase of the site. The remit of the Project Group is to ensure that it delivers this business plan. The Group comprises the SRO, representatives from NNC Finance, the National Lottery Heritage Fund and councillors from both the North and West councils.

- **Staff**

The staffing structure is based on the whole site being managed as part of the Archives and Heritage Service, led by the Chester House Estate Business Manager. They will be responsible for the business plan, taking responsibility for all aspects of the site's management including employees, revenue budgets, buildings and facilities, land holdings, contracts and suppliers, and associated visitor, events programming

and educational services. They will lead the Chester House Leadership Team which will include the Catering Manager, Operations Manager, ARC Curator and Education and Heritage Officer.

The Operations Manager will lead on stakeholder engagement, branding, Marketing and PR of all core business areas and selling and running the site as a day visit destination and venue hire for a wedding, party or corporate event/conference. The Operations Manager will also deputise in the Business Managers absence.

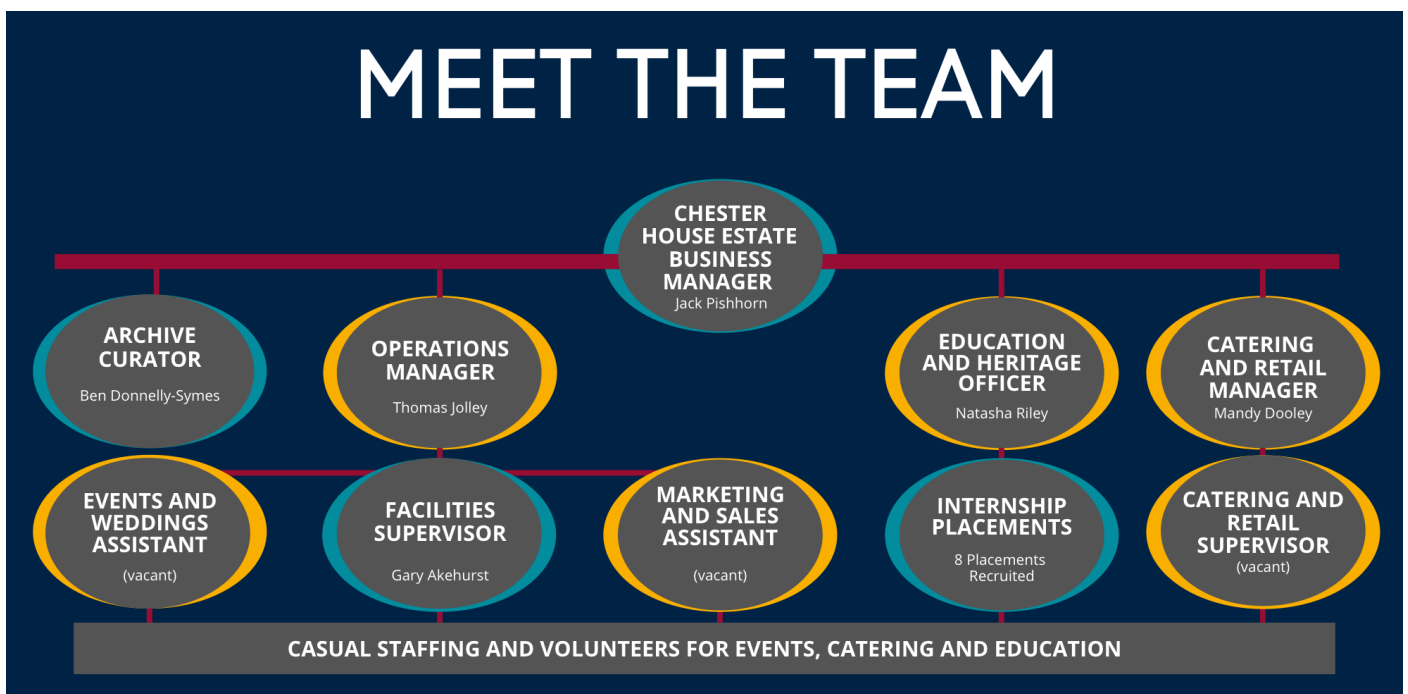
The ARC Curator will be responsible for the transfer of the existing collections to the ARC; the management of those collections and future deposits, working closely with archaeological planning colleagues; and ensuring collections are appropriately preserved, charged for where appropriate, and made accessible to the public. The Finds Liaison Officer will support this work one day a week.

The Education and Heritage Officer is responsible for creating a programme of formal and informal activity that can be marketed and provided to schools, colleges, universities and interest groups.

A Facilities Supervisor will take the lead in the management and maintenance of Chester House Estate including the land and buildings.

The Catering Manager is responsible for the daily operation of the catering facilities at Chester Farm including purchasing, rotas, cleaning, record keeping, food quality and customer service. A catering supervisor will support this role 3 days per week. A small area of retail space within the catering area will also be delivered by this role.

The Catering Team and Events and Education Team will work on a casual basis throughout the season to support busy periods, weekend, large group bookings and events.



- **The refreshed Chester House Estate Business Plan: aims**

It is vital that the West and North Northamptonshire councils delivers a viable future for Chester House Estate. The business vision for Chester House Estate which underpins this business plan is that the site should be self-sustaining within two years of operation.

To achieve self-sufficiency the site will operate as:

- A multi-use site where the innovative programme of monthly events, mix of activities and uses of the buildings makes this a destination of choice.
- A heritage tourist attraction where members of the public can gain an insight into the historical importance of the site, can attend open days and other events including those that are child friendly, and buy refreshments within the Chester House Estate Café.
- An educational and learning facility where pupils can undertake learning associated with the national curriculum and others can go for informal lectures, walks and talks and skills training.
- A facility where research can be undertaken on the archaeological finds discovered across Northamptonshire stored in the purpose-built facility on site.
- A place where volunteers are part of the delivery and community engagement/participation is core to all the projects undertaken.
- A venue for conferences, meetings, weddings, arts, theatre, performance and other cultural and leisure activities.
- A commercial asset which achieves rental income from tenanted space and short-term leases of facilities.

- **The Visitors**

The reasons why people will visit the newly restored and conserved buildings, and the interpreted landscape:

- Unique site with 10,000 years of history & heritage to be discovered
- Provides core of offer for all learning, education, volunteer and community engagement activities.
- Complete Roman small town buried under the ground.
- University training dig generates income for site and develops the research importance of site; also gives dynamic change to story offered to visitors leading to repeat visits.
- Accessible restored historic buildings
- Provides location for activities and events that can generate income, plus commercial opportunities in a desirable location e.g. café in beautiful historic house.
- Exciting education and learning offer
- Income generation from formal and informal learning provision.
- Programme of heritage, culture, arts and leisure events.
- Income generation from development of site as a destination offering multi-faceted offer.
- Chance to have a hands-on experience of heritage.
- Access to archaeology on site and in ARC gives special offer for many of the target audiences for which a charge can be made.
- Opportunity to volunteer and participate in the heritage and other activities.

- Volunteers support delivery of key projects saving large costs to the site e.g. cataloguing of finds, stewarding events, tour guiding etc.
- Chance to explore the archaeology of any Northants parish.
- ARC is new and unprecedented offer for county, generating income from deposition charges, plus visits and short courses.
- Lovely green space in built-up area.
- Repeat visits seeing value of site as open space, plus income from family holiday activities etc.

- **The Business Operations**

The site will fully open to the public from October 2021 and it is anticipated that there will be between 133,000-200,000 visits to the site per annum (Costain Report 2015). This figure determines/impacts on a number of other secondary income sources. The more that can be done to increase visitor footfall, the better the income will be. The Archaeological Resource Centre will be open from May 2021 for the archive move, the centre will open to the public from Summer 2021.

Archaeological Resource Centre

This will bring in an income stream as the estate is able to charge the commercial archaeological contracting units that are working on behalf of developers for the deposition of artefacts. The archaeological archives and the Resource Centre are also key to volunteer and education programmes.

Food and Beverage

A café located in the main farm house over both floors and is capable of seating up to 50-70 visitors at a time with overspill into the garden, with a service point and kitchen capable of delivering snacks and lunches. The restaurant will be run within the Chester House Estate team with the potential to attract up to 72% of the customer base. The catering will also cover all special events including weddings, room hires and parties. A take-away catering service will be available within the shopping courtyard. (Radford Chancellor Catering, 2015)

Chester Farm Retail Offering

Located within the farm house café there will be a small area for Chester House Estate retail including local produce, guide books, Chester House Estate branded gifts and small childrens toys. Much of the stock held will be working with the suppliers on a 'sale or return' basis resulting in the overall stock value being low and constant opportunity to re-fresh the retail range. The retail space will be operated via the catering team operations to reduce operating costs for the department.

Retail Let Units

There are four historic buildings with easy access to parking, located within the farm courtyard. They provide four medium-sized retail spaces plus toilet and washroom facilities. It is intended that these buildings should be let commercially. The business plan figures are based on these spaces being fully let from an early date. There is also a fifth much smaller unit to be commercially let for a traditional crafts centre (e.g blacksmith, woodcarver). It is in the hope that retail will drive an increase in footfall through the gate resulting in increased spend per heads with events and catering. Note: earlier iterations of this business plan had stated that these spaces would be used as the education and office and interpretation space.

Conference/Event Indoor Venue

Created from a converted 17th century threshing barn and surrounding buildings, the complex is capable of seating up to 100 guests in lecture room configuration or 60-70 guests at tables and also includes a kitchen

area, reception and toilets. Its use can be extended by access to a number of ancillary spaces for use as breakout spaces etc. The uses to which the space can be put are many and varied. These include conferences, corporate dinners, weddings, birthday parties, wakes, indoor theatre performances, seasonal events, community events and other leisure and cultural activities. It is intended that this facility should be run commercially with charges on the basis of the length of time the facilities are used. One element of the marketing offer will be the ability to have exclusive evening access to the courtyard in which the barn is situated, made possible because of the multi-functional approach to the use of the historic barn spaces. There is parking adjacent to the buildings, so users of this venue will not be expected to use the visitor car park at Claudius Way.

Bed and Breakfast Let

There is a two-storey, two-bedroom property that is part of the main house but separated from it internally. This will be let as a full-time bed and breakfast for weddings guests, event attendees and the general public. The breakfast will either be served via our Café or within the house space. This bed and breakfast unit let will be managed internally and booked via the Chester House Estate website with prices dependent to seasonality and demand. To manage the space and for security purposes, the Facilities Manager will remain on site within a residential log cabin. Note: earlier iterations of this business plan had stated that this spaces would be used as a residential letting.

Multi-functional use of Buildings

In order to generate maximum amounts of income, another feature of the new business plan is to ensure that spaces are used for a variety of functions/purposes. Thus, although a room or building might be used for interpretation, it will also be important that it can be used for other purposes. For example, an interpretation space might be used for a meeting break out-space for example, or part of the space(s) being used for a bigger event. A wedding event might be take over a number of rooms or part of the middle courtyard. A party might take over the whole of the main house.

Education and Learning Programmes

The education offer will be based from the modern build, known as building 12. This was previously designated for office use but it is now thought that this will be more suited to the education provision. It will provide a large and flexible space overall that can cater for pupils with a variety of needs. The space will also be designed to provide space for staff, so there is also a reception point for queries about use of the buildings for commercial purposes.

The offer will encompass formal and informal learning. There will be a range of education opportunities for schools, higher and further education establishments on a commercial basis. This will include KS1, 2 & 3 history, archeology and georgraphy. The site will also include KS4 business studies, media, farm diversification, animal management and conservation studies. The programmes will be offered from winter term 2021. The informal learning programme will include lectures, walks and talks, child-friendly activities, open days and large-scale events.

Car Parking

After futhur consideration of how to attract footfall, visitors to the site will not be required to pay a parking charge with Chester House Estate being a 'Free to enter' site. Visitors will primarily use the Claudious Way car park. The Hard Standing 'Lime Street Avenue' entrance will be open for special event days, overflow on busy days and for guests, staff and tenants.

Boat Landing Stage and Mooring

A mooring will be built along the Chester House Estate section of the river Nene banks. This will provide for canal boats and canoes to moor at the site and therefore for people to access the site from the water. Although a charge will not be made for the mooring per se, it is anticipated that this will attract a different sort of visitor and increase visitor numbers overall.

Coach Group Tours

Research and marketing will be undertaken into the options around attracting coach tours to the site. This might incorporate, for example, a tour of the landscape, a visit to the Archaeological Resource Centre and a buffet lunch, offered in partnership with another location nearby to which the party would then move on.

Children's Play Area

Play areas are a simple and proven attraction for young families at any destination and enable sites to get repeat business. It is intended to install a small play area near the café initially. Ongoing review of the use of this provision will enable a decision as to whether further development of this approach might help to increase visitor footfall.

Marketing, PR and Sales

For outreach sales work such as attending weddings shows and large scale events and for education outreach we will invest in a branded vehicle, this vehicle will also come in use for repair and maintenance work on the farm. It is intended to build our own stand alone website which can then be linked to our NCC Chester House Estate page. Our website, branding, social media and PR work will all be managed by our Marketing and Sales Manager. Initially we will purchase a visitor attraction based till system that can run our catering, retail, bed and breakfast and event ticket sales business through. The new EPOS system will also allow for easy financial and statistical reporting as well as collect vital visitor contact data following GDPR rules.

Outdoor Marquee Venue Hire – Orchard Gardens

Within the walled garden is an ideal space for a larger marquee wedding (120-150 people) with toilet and catering facilities being close by in the Farm House. This space also allows the farm to host multiple events at Chester House Estate (the other being in the Threshing Barn) during the peak season.

Nene Scape Green Way Link

The East Northamptonshire Greenway (the Greenway) is a programme to develop a series of safer walking and cycling routes across the district. The overall aspiration is to create a linear or 'spinal' route through the Nene Valley; linking Peterborough and Northampton railway stations and connecting with villages and sites of importance including Chester House Estate. The link which is a footpath and cycleway will provide access to and from Chester House Estate to Rushden Lakes who receive 6 million + visitors per year, Stanwick Lakes and onto Wellingborough (population of 80,000). NCC will be responsible for the upkeep and maintenance of the footpath at Chester House Estate following the project.

- **Activities, Education and Engagement**

Chester House Estate as a Destination

There will be a clear marketing strategy around developing the site as a destination, bringing together the features and buildings described above. Thus the site may become known for its successful production of monthly and seasonal events including open air theatre, Father Christmas visits, Easter Egg Hunts, Pumpkin

Carving and Fireworks. The site will also hold heritage fairs, fortnightly food markets and be seen as child-friendly place with lots for all the family to do.

Child-Friendly Approach

Family groups are a vital part of the audience and the engagement with such an audience initially will be through family-focussed activities and targeted events. For example, child-focussed trails across the site and open days that are focussed on a family audience.

Joint working with Leicester University

A partnership is in place with the University of Leicester's School of Archaeology and Ancient History to advance and develop research of the site and provide an associated education programme. The university is intending to use the site as its key training site for its undergraduate archaeology students, as a training site for teachers and as a location for major schools history fairs.

Archaeological Digs

In order to keep the historical site interesting to repeat visitors, it is imperative that more is learned about the site through further archaeological digs. Any future digs will be at zero cost to the County Council and in partnership with the University of Leicester. That the University wishes to use the site for its training digs is very significant, enabling a developing role in research into the future.

Interpretation

The interpretation of the site is crucial to generating an audience and helping to encourage repeat visitors. The focus of the interpretation is on explaining the archaeological and historical importance of the site, especially given much of the evidence is buried under the ground. The first phase will be to install fixed interpretation within one of two large modern buildings. During the second phase the development will focus on the use of three dimensional images and augmented reality to bring the site more fully to life, as more and more is discovered about the site. Sitting within the ground floor of our education facility, will allow for the site to operate as normal during events and space hires and have a larger impact for the visitor with the interpretation will largely be in one space. Note: The interpretation was due to be spread out across the site. This will now allow for a larger restaurant and future opportunities to use the spaces for additional income such as increased conference spacing and additional pop-up retail. The initial interpretation project is valued at £250,000. This will be reviewed in the light of the refreshed business plan.

Volunteers

The volunteering community is an essential part of the Chester House Estate business plan. By maintaining a large group of volunteers willing to undertake some of the basic maintenance requirements for the site, take part in archaeological digs and acting as guides for the public there is a reduced need for revenue to support these activities. Currently there are approximately 150 members of public who have registered interest with the Council. It will be important to make best use of volunteer skills and ensure they have the appropriate training and support to deliver, for example, exciting guided tours and child-friendly activities. The Chester House Estate project will include a 'Volunteering Hub' where members of the public can visit to learn more about the ongoing volunteer lead projects at Chester House Estate and across NNC sites. This space will also be used for volunteer break and social space.

- **Managing the Landscape**

Grazing Licence

The annual grazing licence will bring in a modest income and reduce, though not remove, ground maintenance costs. It is also a very effective way of looking after Scheduled Monuments, so is an approach supported by Historic England.

Grants

The site benefits from a small grant from Natural England as a result of entering into a Higher Tier Environmental Stewardship agreement. This money contributes towards the landscape maintenance of the site.

- **Financial Viability**

The work done has been robust. There has been benchmarking with similar venues and commercial advice taken about current market conditions.

The table below breaks down the forecast income, grants and expenditure in more detail.

Note that this is work in progress underpinned by a number of assumptions and market testing. The assumptions will be revised and refined as the project develops. All are captured in the detailed tables.

The below forecast does not include any capital spend at Chester House Estate including the building restorations and interpretation project.

Reports Used to inform this Business Plan:

Report from Bray Fox Smith (2019)

Property and Marketing Report 2018 (Propsearch)

Draft Financial Plan November 2016 (Capita)

Chester Farm Catering Feasibility Highlight Report 2015 (Radford Chancellor)

Chester Farm Business Plan Review 2015 (Costain Heritage)

Chester Farm Catering Feasibility Report (2015)

	YEAR 1 - 21/22	YEAR 2 - 22/23	YEAR 3 - 23/24	YEAR 4 - 24/25	YEAR 5 - 25/26	YEAR 6 - 26/27
Footfall Projection						
Free to Enter Footfall to Building Complex	66600	133200	140000	160000	190000	225000
Income Projection						
Council Countributions (North and West)	298244	298244	283331	269165	255706	0
Artisan Retail Units	13800	13800	18000	18000	25000	30000
Archeaological Archiving Centre	10000	80000	20000	20000	30000	30000
Community Donations	7500	10000	10000	15000	15000	18500
Site Tours	3000	8000	8000	8000	8000	8500
Workshops	6000	15048	15048	18500	18500	22000
Educational Programme	6500	17875	23100	30697	35700	42500
Retail Sales	33300	66000	70000	80000	95000	112500
Weddings	28000	45000	60000	80000	100000	115000
Special Events	20000	28850	56700	56700	62000	75000
Space Hire and Conferencing	15500	22000	25000	25000	27000	32000
Food and Beverage Income (Café and Horsebox)	133200	266400	280000	320000	380000	450000
Weddings, Conferencing and Events Catering	17000	24000	24000	28000	33000	45000
Bed and Breakfast Accomodation	17000	24950	24950	29500	33000	36000
NE Stewardship Scheme	23186	2664	2664	0	0	0
Grazing Tenancy	1250	1250	1300	1300	1300	1300
NE Land Management / RPA	1250	1250	1250	1250	1250	1250
Tota Income Projection	634730	925331	923343	1001112	1120456	1019550
Expenditure Projection						
Fixed Salaries	218764	284260	284260	298500	298500	315000
Casual Staffing	35649	75640	87867	87867	90000	95000
Volunteer Fees / Millage	5378	1500	2000	2000	2500	2500
Site Operational Costs	53384	95500	95500	120000	125000	136000
Marketing and PR	16200	28200	28200	28200	28200	3000
Events and Programming	12000	14425	28350	28350	31000	37500

Conferencing	2000	6000	6000	7200	7200	7200
Archeaological Archiving Centre	11489	21725	21725	21725	21725	24000
Community and Education	24169	14524	14524	14524	14524	20000
Retail	16650	33000	35000	40000	47500	56250
Food and Beverage	81900	145200	152000	174000	206500	247500
Business Mobilisation inc Interpretation	271747	25000	25000	30000	30000	40000
Total Expenditure Projection	749330	744974	780426	852366	902649	983950
Profit/Loss	-114600	180357	142917	148746	217807	35600